

Warren Lehrer. *A Life in Books. The Rise and Fall of Bleu Mobley.*

Kristof Van Gansen

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A Life in Books is written and designed by Warren Lehrer. Lehrer is a writer, artist/designer, playwright, performer, and lecturer who has won numerous awards and grants for his work. He is also a professor at the School of Art+Design at Purchase College, SUNY, and a founding faculty member of the *Designer as Author* grad program at the School of Visual Arts. His publications include *Crossing the BLVD: strangers, neighbors, aliens in a New America* (2003, with his wife Judith Sloan), *GRRRHHHHH: a study of social patterns* (1988, with Dennis Bernstein and Sandra Brownlee), *French Fries* (1984, with Bernstein), *I mean you know* (1983), and *Versations* (1980). His books seek to capture the shape of thought and to reunite the oral traditions of storytelling with the printed page, which is probably the reason why they frequently defy the conventions of the latter.

With *A Life in Books*, Lehrer has published his first novel—an “illuminated novel”, which he has also performed on several occasions. It is presented as a memoir and a retrospective monograph on the (fictional) author Bleu Mobley, who is imprisoned for refusing to reveal the name of a source for a rather scathing book on the George Bush Jr. administration. The story of Mobley’s life and work is related in the first person (based on tape recordings and interviews) and interspersed with reproductions of the covers of all of his 101 books, catalogue copy, reviews, articles and letters, and even book excerpts from many of his books. The latter can run up to several pages and function as short stories in their own right. The result is an appealing pell-mell—visually, through the beautifully designed covers and a well-crafted expressive typography, as well as textually, through the use of many different genres and discourses. As such, the book indeed lives up to its title: the life of Mobley is told by or through the books illuminating the novel, and the reader is offered a behind-the-scenes look at the artist and the creative process. For Mobley, writing books is a way of filling in gaps, of making sense of himself and of everything surrounding him—it is often an occurrence or a meeting with a person that lies at the origin of a new novel. He specifically wants “[t]o paint a panoramic portrait of America—of humanity—one person at a time” (232). To the backdrop of recent American and global historical events, he frequently gives a voice to ordinary people, to the rejected, to minorities. He also sees writing as a means of exploring possibilities and of imagining a different kind of world (173). In line with this, the book constantly reflects on the status, nature, and use of narrative and on the distinction between fiction and non-fiction, “true stories” and “non-true stories” (27). Mobley starts out as a journalist for his school newspaper, but then becomes a fiction writer. He finally crosses this seemingly sacrosanct border by merging the two, which might very well be the cause of his demise.

Lehrer’s novel is also a reflection on the book as a medium. In this respect, the novel can be read as a micro-history of book-making. Mobley starts out as an artisan, crafting one-off books in a

“carefully preserved letterpress shop—à la Gutenberg” in his school (18), and publishes his first books at small publishing houses. Later on, he becomes a best-selling author who secretly has an entire team of writers working for him in a studio (under the pseudonym of Dr. Sky Jacobs they even churn out a load of self-help-like books). He quite quickly becomes a public figure, no longer just writing, but also making television and radio appearances, and actively blogging. Later on, he starts questioning the power of writing and of the book “as a vehicle of stories” (324), and composes book-objects instead: books one can wear as clothing or use as a toy, books with little televisions inside, or even “illuminated manuscripts” in the most literal sense—books with fire or lightbulbs in them. At the same time, he publishes poetry specifically designed for toilet paper rolls or poems printed on kites flying through the sky, effectively disconnecting literature from its almost self-evident carrier, the book. Already from the beginning, though, Mobley defied the conventions of the book in various experiments with typography and the shape of the book, as well as by constantly making up or mixing genres. By the end of the book, he seems to have completely lost faith in the power of writing, to which his recording his memoirs on a tape recorder attests. The creator of stories appears to return to the oral tradition in a move which makes history come full circle. On the other hand, Mobley starts organizing writing workshops for the other inmates (he had previously been a creative writer professor). Again giving a voice to those otherwise unheard, he even publishes their writings in book form—writings which teach him things, which further complete his process of getting to grips with everything, just as they do for the inmates, and restore his faith in story. Even if Mobley finally decides to stop writing and to take up painting “for relaxation” (376), his painting closing the novel portrays a book.

While it might be unusual to review a work of fiction for this type of journal, Warren Lehrer’s *A Life in Books. The Rise and Fall of Bleu Mobley* deserves broad recognition. It provides a profound reflection on narrative and the boundaries of truth and fiction, as well as on writing and the status of the book as a medium. All of this happens in a very fluid, readable and witty style encompassing many genres. As an “illuminated novel” written and designed by Lehrer, it explores the functions of and interactions between different types of texts and images. At the same time, it broadens the scope of authorship, traditionally restricted to writing contents, to include designing the material aspects of a book—a dimension which is part and parcel of book creation and of the experience of the book. No longer a writer, Lehrer is a book composer, as Bleu Mobley would have it, and his composition is well worth interacting with.

Kristof Van Gansen is a PhD student at KU Leuven, where he is doing a research on the French journal *Arts et métiers graphiques*.

Email: kristof.vangansen@arts.kuleuven.be